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Hendra Virus: please be alert (but not alarmed!)

The recent spate of Hendra cases in New South Wales and Queensland reminds us all to be on the lookout for this nasty disease. Flying foxes are the host species for Hendra virus. We do not know for sure how transmission occurs from flying foxes to horses, but it is thought to be through horses coming into contact with secretions from the flying foxes, especially birthing fluids.

The furthest south a Hendra case has been confirmed so far is in Macksville, between Port Macquarie and Coffs Harbour. However, as Cowra and surrounding areas are home to both flying fox colonies and horses, it is wise to be aware of the symptoms of Hendra virus and what preventative measures should be taken to minimise the chances of infection.

Clinical signs in horses include:

- A rapid onset of illness
- Fever (temperature above 40oC)
- High heart rate
- Breathing up
- Frothy discharge from the nose
- Neurological signs – wobbly gait, aimless wandering, head tilt, muscle twitching, loss of vision.
- Unexpected deaths

If you suspect a Hendra case, keep all animals and people away from the horse. Contact your vet immediately, stating your suspicion of Hendra. Shower and change your clothes if you have handled the sick horse.

Humans are infected through close contact with affected horses. Unfortunately, horses can shed the virus in their body secretions (eg. saliva) for three days before the onset of clinical signs. Therefore it is wise to practice good hygiene and biosecurity measures at all times – always wash your hands after handling your horse.

Hendra is similar to most diseases in that prevention is better than cure! Reduce the potential for flying foxes to infect your horses. Place water and feed bins undercover and away from fruiting or flowering trees. If possible, remove horses from paddocks containing trees that attract flying foxes. If you cannot remove the horse from the paddock, tape off the area under the tree. Isolate any sick horses.

Keep your dogs and other pets safe as well. To date, one dog has tested positive for Hendra virus, however the dog did not show any signs of disease. The dog was on a Hendra quarantined property in Queensland and it is thought he contracted the virus after close contact with an infected horse. Cats, pigs, guinea pigs and ferrets have developed infection with Hendra virus in laboratory conditions only. None of these species have become infected naturally.

CSIRO scientists are developing a vaccine to prevent Hendra virus infection in horses. The earliest it is likely to be released is 2013. There is no research into a vaccine for humans as people would be protected indirectly by vaccinating their horses. There are no known cases of flying fox to human transmission.

Hendra is a rare but deadly disease. With so little information currently known about the virus, it is wise to be aware of the symptoms and preventative measures. By being alert, but not alarmed we can keep ourselves and our horses safe.

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The team at Cowra Veterinary Centre: Peter Launders with 'Tom' the Blue Cattle Dog, Danielle Tysoe, Kellie Seres, Deenita Mitchell, Adilee Ryan & Katy Cross-